



CHINA NEWS

China flexes military muscle in Indo-Pacific, testing US and allies

February 27, 2025 10:44 AM By William Yang



This handout photo taken Feb. 13, 2025, and released by The Australian Defence Force shows sailors aboard the Royal Australian Navy ship HMAS Arunta looking at the People's Liberation Army-Navy vessels in the Tasman Sea.

TAIPEI, TAIWAN — China has held a series of live-fire military drills across the Indo-Pacific region over the past week, from the Taiwan Strait to the Tasman Sea. Analysts say the exercises, which included “extremely capable” weapons systems, were aimed at testing the United States and regional countries’ responses to military threats.

“China understands there is a strategic window to demonstrate its ability to conduct military exercises [in areas near some U.S. allies] because the bandwidth of the Trump administration is spread quite thin by global issues that it has to deal with,” said Stephen Nagy, a professor of politics and international studies at Tokyo’s International Christian University.

“These drills are predatory because when China senses gaps, it will move in and fill those vacuums,” he told VOA by phone.

On Wednesday, the People's Liberation Army, or PLA, conducted "shooting training" in waters 74 kilometers (46 miles) off Taiwan's southwestern coast, prompting Taipei to deploy military aircraft and naval vessels to monitor the situation.

In addition to the "shooting training," which Taiwanese authorities said was unannounced and posed threats to commercial flights and shipping, the Chinese military also conducted a "joint combat readiness drill" in waters and airspace near Taiwan, deploying 45 Chinese military aircraft and 14 naval vessels.

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"During this period it even blatantly violated international practice by setting up a drills area in waters about 40 nautical miles (74 kilometers) off the coast ... without prior warning, claiming that it would carry out 'shooting training,'" Taiwan's defense ministry said in a statement released on Wednesday.

While the Chinese defense ministry has yet to comment on the military drills, the Chinese Communist Party's fourth-ranked official, Wang Huning, "called for resolute efforts to advance the cause of national reunification" during an annual meeting on works related to Taiwan on Tuesday.

During the Chinese defense ministry's monthly press conference Thursday, spokesperson Wu Qian described the "shooting training" near Taiwan as "routine drills." He added that Taiwanese authorities' criticism was "pure hype."

"We request that they stop playing this kind of game to attract interest," he said.

Gulf of Tonkin and Tasman Sea

In addition to Taiwan, the PLA conducted live-fire drills in the Gulf of Tonkin near Vietnam and the Tasman Sea between Australia and New Zealand.

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The live-fire drills carried out by three Chinese naval vessels in the Tasman Sea prompted Canberra and Wellington to express serious concerns. New Zealand's defense minister, Judith Collins, said the Chinese vessels were equipped with "extremely capable" weapons, such as anti-ship ballistic missiles that could potentially hit Australia.

"We've certainly never seen a task group of this capability undertaking this sort of work. It's certainly a change," she told Radio New Zealand on Monday, adding that the Chinese military didn't inform Wellington about the planned exercises.

Meanwhile, New Zealand's foreign minister, Winston Peters, told Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi during a meeting in Beijing that the naval drills were "a failure" in the bilateral relationship and Wellington hopes it could be "corrected into the future."

Despite concerns expressed by New Zealand and Australia, the Chinese defense ministry said Canberra "has unjustly criticized China and deliberately exaggerated the issue, and we are astonished and strongly dissatisfied with this."

'Disruptive and destabilizing'

Some experts describe the Chinese live-fire drills as "disruptive and destabilizing" and say the activities show Beijing has no intention of improving relations with countries in the Indo-Pacific region through dialogue.

"It's difficult to fathom why China would conduct military-to-military dialogue with Australia after a five-year gap and then conduct live-fire exercises as far from China's shores," Drew Thompson, a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore and a former Pentagon official, told VOA by phone.

"It sends a very mixed signal and the message is that China is choosing violence, not peace," he added.

Alessio Patalano, professor of war and strategy in East Asia at King's College London, said these exercises also reflect "a great sense of maturity" in the Chinese military's capabilities.

"They've been able to conduct repeated exercise on top of a very intense daily activity, particularly in areas around Taiwan," he told VOA by phone.

While regional countries are alarmed by the Chinese military drills, Thompson said they need to recognize that their "diplomatic efforts" have failed to deter China's aggression and start investing more in their defense capabilities.

“For these countries to ensure their security, they need to invest much more heavily in their own defense,” he told VOA.

In an interview with New Zealand’s 1News on Sunday, New Zealand’s Collins said the country needed to “spend a lot more” in defense.

In addition to increasing defense spending, Nagy in Japan said regional countries should consider documenting and highlighting the Chinese military’s aggressive behavior in their nearby areas.

Efforts to document and “share activities that the Chinese military engages in with the global community does put China in a position where they have to explain their bad behavior, which is not something they do very well,” he told VOA.

Since the Trump administration remains focused on facilitating peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, Patalano said he expects China to keep conducting “short-term, not-too-much-pre-announced” military exercises across the Indo-Pacific in the coming months.